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To cite this article: Finlay, Craig. "Collection Development for Graphic Novel Collections in Academic Libraries: A Brief Communication of Results." *InULA Notes*, vol. 30, no. 1, spring 2018, pp. 16–18.

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Collection Development for Graphic Novel Collections in Academic Libraries: A Brief Communication of Results

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A number of researchers have noted the increasing inclusion of graphic novels in college courses and in university library collections. As Glenn Masuchika and Gail Boldt (2010) write, "There is little argument that comics, cartoons and graphic novels are being seriously collected by librarians as legitimate scholarly sources. Once considered nothing more than low-brow entertainment primarily for children, comics have developed significantly" (p. 511). Aside from their inclusion in college reading lists alongside more traditional materials, instructors are taking advantage of the uniqueness of the medium to achieve different educational outcomes including: teaching ESL students (Chun, 2009; Cimermanova, 2014), teaching visual literacy (Marrall, 2016; Schwartz, 2002) or in art education (Williams, 2008). Such a diversity of implementations in higher education means a better understanding of collection development trends for university libraries is needed.

Given that the presence of graphic novels in academic libraries is now seemingly commonplace, the lack of a national, large-scale survey looking at collection development for graphic novels is a deficiency in the literature. This brief communication details some of the results of a survey of over 600 state university academic libraries regarding their graphic novel collections and collection development policies. This is the first such survey, though a number of studies have examined collection development and graphic novels from different perspectives. Masuchika and Boldt (2010) surveyed 44 academic libraries regarding collection of Japanese manga. Toren (2010) advises selection of graphic novels for both leisure reading and academic purposes, a view shared by O'English, Matthews and Lindsay (2006). Slater and Kardos (2017) looked at collection development in a single university library and offer experiential wisdom concerning outreach.

Methods

A 20 question survey was sent individually to 630 collection development librarians at state university campuses. Emails for these individuals were manually collected. As of the time of writing, the survey has generated 157 responses, or a 25% response rate. It is desired that the number of responses reach 200, though this may not prove possible. This brief communication will describe the results of three questions. The full paper will be submitted for peer-review once a greater number of responses has been received.

- R1: How prevalent are graphic novel collections in academic libraries?
- R2: How common are collection development policies for graphic novels in academic libraries?
- R3: What is the perception of graphic novels in academic libraries?

Results

The majority of respondents (60.5%) indicated their libraries had what they would call a graphic novel collection. A follow up question for those responding “yes” inquired about the size of the collection [Figure 1].

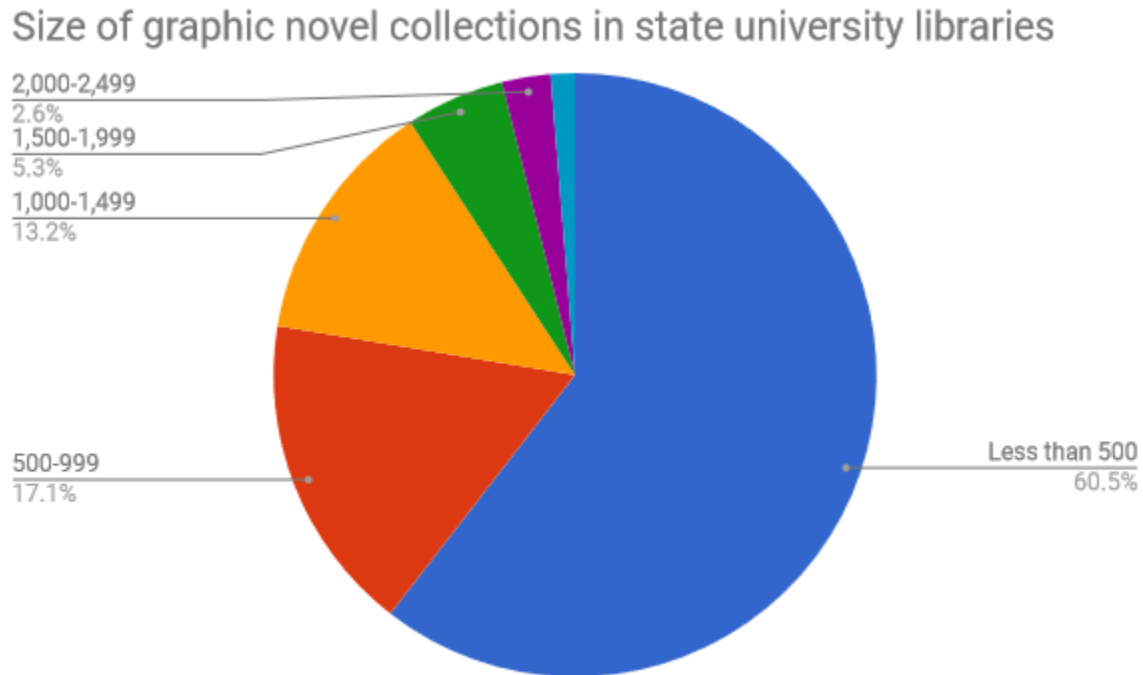


Figure 1: Size of graphic novel collections in state university libraries, n=141.

While the majority of responding libraries reported having a graphic novel collection, the heavy majority of respondents (81.4%) indicated their libraries did not have a collection development policy for graphic novels. At the same time, a plurality of respondents (46%) indicated they had a single individual primarily responsible for selecting graphic novels for purchase. Three quarters of libraries responded that they were currently collecting graphic novels.

The third major research question allowed for respondents to write freely, and as such take on a more qualitative tone. It is a consistent theme in the literature that opinions on graphic novels vary in academia, meeting with some skepticism in higher education. O’English, Matthews and Lindsay (2006) note that “teaching faculty in higher education are increasingly using graphic novels in the classroom as well as studying them as academic fodder in their own right. Nevertheless, many faculty members retain antiquated notions of graphic novels based on their own past exposure to comic books in their youth, or are unaware of them at all, resulting in doubts over whether the medium truly qualifies as ‘literature’” (p. 178). Downey (2009) writes that “Published research about graphic novel collections in academic libraries has been limited to investigating the genre as either recreational reading for busy college students or as part of the cultural and historical record.

There is still resistance to the genre in some circles; combining text and images is considered fine for children's books, but children are expected to "grow out of it" and start reading "real books" (P. 181).

Question 18 of the survey asked, "In your own words, how would you describe the perception of graphic novels among the librarians at your institution?" The responses reveal a variety of opinions regarding graphic novels. Several responses noted that graphic novels were gaining greater acceptance among librarians. One responded noted, "All of our librarians endorsed establishment of the original collection, including those who do not read graphic novels. Even those whose original perception was on the negative side regarding graphic novels now have a positive view of them." A common response was that some librarians were enthusiastic while others were largely indifferent. Several noted a perceived age gap in how graphic novels were received by librarians at their institutions. It was also commonly reported that graphic novels were seen as popular reading. These responses collectively confirm the transitional place occupied in academia by the medium. While most university libraries have what they would term a "graphic novel collection," only a minority have crafted a collection development policy for those items. Collections are small – with most of them being less than 500 titles, and there is a perception among librarians that many do not yet consider them to be more than pleasure reading.

A full description of the survey results will be submitted for peer-review in the summer of 2018.

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